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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6718
INFO RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHFMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 6944
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9590
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 5412
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1534
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2655
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 6444

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000935

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR PREL TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND PROTEST APRIL 9 UPDATE: RED NUMBERS START DROPPING AHEAD OF SONGKRAN, TAXI BLOCKADES EMPLOYED

REF: BANGKOK 907

BANGKOK 00000935 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE, REASON 1.4 (B, D)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Anti-government red-shirt protesters expanded their peaceful protest to new targets around Bangkok April 9 but suffered declining numbers in comparison to April ¶8. The red-shirt 4:00 PM deadline for PM Abhisit and three Privy Councilors to resign passed without effect. The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) rally peaked late in the evening on April 8 after an estimated crowd of 85,000 - 100,000 gathered for a speech delivered by fugitive former PM Thaksin through video link. From an early morning base of 25,000 April 9, red-shirt numbers dropped steadily through mid-afternoon, though the addition of sympathetic taxi blockades of key downtown streets expanded the impact of the protest throughout Bangkok. One UDD co-leader threatened to carry the red-shirt protest to Pattaya for the scheduled April 10-12 ASEAN 3 and East Asian Summits; for his part, PM Abhisit vowed the Summit meetings would take place as planned.

¶2. (C) Comment: Red-shirt organizers may have miscalculated in calling for a major rally on the eve of the most important Thai holiday, the traditional Thai New Year Songkran Festival, when most Thai return to their home villages. While Songkran is an official holiday from April 13-15, many communities start their celebrations before then, some as early as April 10, requiring travel ahead of time, which may explain why the red crowd started melting away April 9. End Summary and Comment.

THAKSIN TASKS REDS TO "BRING BACK DEMOCRACY"

¶3. (SBU) Fugitive former PM Thaksin, speaking via video link from an unknown location abroad, urged an estimated 100,000 enthusiastic red-shirts late April 8 to continue the protests in order to bring democracy back to Thailand for the sake of future generations.

APRIL 9: LOWER NUMBERS, NEW TARGETS, TAXI BLOCKADE

¶4. (SBU) A crowd of 25,000 remained overnight in the vicinity of Prem's residence, the Government House, and the Royal Plaza. However, estimates of protesters dropped steadily throughout the day, down to fewer than 14,000 by mid-afternoon. To keep red-shirts engaged, protest leaders directed columns to march to four new locations mid-day -- the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Constitutional Court, the Royal Thai Army headquarters and Democrat Party headquarters. The most significant development of the day came when dozens of taxi drivers sympathetic to the red shirts blocked several major roads and expressway entrances, particularly around Victory Monument, causing traffic jams on many of Bangkok's main streets. At 1730, about 3000 redshirts were at Victory Monument and 2000 at Constitutional Monument.

¶5. (SBU) Protest leaders had demanded the immediate and unconditional resignations of PM Abhisit and Privy Councilors Prem Tinsulanonda, Surayud Chulanont and Chanchai Likhitjitta on April 8, giving a deadline of 1600 April 9. The deadline passed without any response. At 1700, core UDD leaders read out a second statement on stage, proclaiming that: the red-shirts no longer accepted the existence/status of the Abhisit government; they reserved the right to oppose the government by all means necessary, "as a property owner would defend his assets against a thief"; and previous demands remained in effect.

RED THREAT TO ASEAN SUMMIT IN PATTAYA?

¶6. (SBU) UDD co-leader and Puea Thai MP Jatuporn announced

BANGKOK 00000935 002.2 OF 002

from the main protest stage that the red-shirts would take their protest to Pattaya to "obstruct" the April 10-12 ASEAN summits, though the declining numbers of red-shirts April 9 suggests protest leaders may face difficulties sustaining protest actions as Songkhran approaches. PM Abhisit told the media on April 9 that the ASEAN Plus 3 and ASEAN Plus 6 Summits would continue as planned.
JOHN